I Tatti Research Series
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THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE IN THE 19TH CENTURY  
Revision, Revival, and Return

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## Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank Villa I Tatti and the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa where the conference at the origin of this volume was held in June 2013. Our gratitude goes to Lino Pertile, Jonathan Nelson and the staff of Villa I Tatti for encouraging and facilitating the early stages of this project. For dedicated help with the publication we wish to thank Victoria Addona and Mathilde Bonvalot, and, from Villa I Tatti, Thomas Gruber. Together they formed a strong and enthusiastic team that brought together in a timely way the work of twenty-two scholars—no mean feat. No less grateful are we to our editor Marco Jellinek from Officina Libraria who balanced the needs to create an accessible product while at the same time a high quality one. Indeed, with this volume we inaugurate the I Tatti Research Series as we continue our close and traditional association with Harvard University Press.
Symbols of Time: Ariosto, the Nazarenes, and the Poetics of Epic Fresco

Cordula Grewe

“But what of history painting, you ask?” This is the question with which Eugène Fromentin, the French artist, novelist, and critic, addressed the readers of the Revue des deux mondes on February 15, 1876. “First of all, can we even be certain that a school of history still exists, the way things are going? What’s more, even if this old term from the Ancien Régime still applies to those traditions so brilliantly defended but so little followed, don’t imagine that it will escape the fusion of the genres or resist the temptation to enter the mainstream.”1 Uttered two years after the first Impressionist exhibition, Fromentin’s concern with the traditional hierarchy of genres might seem anachronistic. However, his worries affirm the persistent centrality of academic theory to the evolution, perception, and theoretical penetration of nineteenth-century art.2 And this was not only true for France. Across Europe, academic norms were crumbling and yet still retained a vexing position within the battle over modern art and what artistic modernity should (or could) look like. And perhaps no genre came more under attack, lost more ground and status, than the formerly so esteemed genre of history painting. This fact seems even more noteworthy given the general perception of the nineteenth century as an age when a new and acute historical awareness reshaped the cultural sensibility. It is then no small irony that in the age of history, history painting was in a crisis. One reaction to this crisis is the subject of this essay.

Interlude: The Brotherhood of St. Luke

The reaction in question is that of a vanguard that, in 1809, set out to reform art through life, and life through art, and to do so in the name of Christ. That vanguard’s reform program was one of religious revival and reenchantment, a program built upon the belief that the past held the key to the future, that the emulation of a certain form, of a specific style, of a lost idiom would usher in a resurrection of the plainspoken piety that had once inspired these simple but powerful forms. That past was the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that piety the Christian faith, that vanguard the Brotherhood of St. Luke.3
The origins of this influential artist collective were humble. In 1809, six disgruntled art students had united in Vienna as a rebellion against the academy’s drill and immoral aesthetics, and a year later they initiated one of the earliest secessions in modern art when they left the academy to find salvation, creative freedom, and artistic success in Rome. Once arrived, the collective set out to reform German painting (and, in the process, contemporary art as such). Their specific mission was the rescue of history painting, and to that end the former art students turned to the only format they believed could transcend egoistic individualism, resist capitalist alienation, and create an art for the nation and the ages: the collaborative effort of epic mural decoration.

However, having identified the medium they believed would best serve their project of artistic regeneration, spiritual rebirth, and a new national art, they still had to answer to the crisis of history painting. The next task was thus to find a mode of painting appropriate for their ambitious reform program. Here, guidance came from a beacon of German Romantic thought and personal mentor of the rebellious fraternity, Friedrich Schlegel. In 1803, Schlegel had formulated the principle of a new Romantic historia: history painting must be transformed into symbolic representation. The Brotherhood of St. Luke set out to translate this theory into practice.

**History Painting as Symbolic Representation: Three Theses**

This is an essay about an obsession with time and temporality, and the multifaceted layers of its manifestation in art. It is an essay about the quest to overcome the human condition of living in history, and to extract from the linear flow of worldly time an image of divine atemporality, an image couched in pictorial terms and ruled by new norms of representation. Three aspects are key to my analysis of this concerted effort: first, the reworking of traditional allegory into a more open symbolic mode; second, the poetological dimension of this endeavor, especially the reception of contemporary genre theory with its classification of epic and drama as distinct temporal forms; third, the assimilation of biblical hermeneutics, more precisely of typology, as a stylistic mode of expression and the expansion of figural thinking from iconographic code to aesthetic principle.

These three aspects bring to light an inextricable connection between content and form, iconography and style, subject matter and medium. As the obsession with time flowed into experimentation with pictorial temporality, it became part and parcel of the period’s larger debate over media, their various qualities, limits, and acceptable applications. This played out most dramatically
in the medium cherished most by the Nazarenes for its collaborative and anti-capitalist nature: fresco. My analysis thus focuses on the Brotherhood’s second major mural project, a series of three interconnected fresco cycles dedicated to epic poems by Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso. Executed in Rome between 1817 and 1827, these decorations would become a milestone in the Romantic evolution of history painting as symbolic representation.

The Casino Massimo

In January of 1817, Carlo Massimo, head of one of the oldest families of the Roman aristocracy, turned to the Brotherhood of St. Luke to decorate the garden casino of his city villa near San Giovanni in Laterano. A simple square building, the intimate space consisted of three interconnected apartments with vaulted ceilings, an inviting set-up but one difficult to adorn because only one wall was unencumbered by doors or windows. The final decoration scheme allotted one independent cycle per room, each dedicated to a different Italian poet: Dante, Tasso, or Ariosto.

The subject matter catered to the patriotism of a Roman aristocrat as much as it suited a group of religious revivalists. The chosen authors embodied the patron’s national culture, articulating a form of nationalism indebted not to the nascent Italian Risorgimento but to the crusading ideology of the Holy Alliance. At the same time, the motif of a campaign against unbelief—so magnificently personified in Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata and Ariosto’s Orlando furioso by the crusaders’ Islamic adversary, the Saracens—forged a powerful link to the brethren’s own antirevolutionary, anti-Napoleonic agenda. With the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, current fears about a rapidly expanding Islamic empire inflected any evocation of the medieval crusades and gave the murals unexpected contemporary relevance. Beyond this allusion to daily politics, however, the intensely devout Marchese saw the frescoes above all as a cultural vehicle to promote his view of the Church as a living organism and an expression of life integral to social well-being. The commission’s national overtones thus did not interfere with the essential goal of the Germans who ended up with its execution. On the contrary: the epics’ religious sentiment allowed a smooth assimilation of literary themes and national significance into a universal claim for the power of Christianity.

Word about the latest project of the rebellious expatriates traveled fast, including rumors about their handsome remuneration. On February 16, 1817, Barthold Georg Niebuhr, the scholarly Prussian ambassador to the Holy See, reported back home, “Cornelius means to paint a series of subjects from
Dante—Overbeck from Tasso.” This left the third and central room open for assignment, and it was not long before news about this opportunity reached the ears of the Brotherhood’s youngest member, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. The native of Leipzig had joined the fraternity only that year, via correspondence, from distant Vienna, and was en route to Rome when he heard about the Massimo project. Head over heels, he ended his stay in Florence and hurried down south. On January 23, 1818, he arrived at his destination and wasted no time submitting a proposal. The aristocratic patron was instantly smitten and entrusted the twenty-three-year old, despite his young age and inexperience, with the Ariosto apartment. It was a wise decision.

Narrative and Allegory
Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld was well prepared for the Massimo commission. After all, he had already delved deeply into the Renaissance fantasy in his first large-scale oil painting, *The Battle of Six on the Island Lipadusa* (Fig. 1). Still produced in Vienna, this adaptation of the epic’s forty-second canto showcases Schnorr’s Romantic notion of history and a new kind of historical representation, which would soon reach refinement and final form in the Massimo frescoes.

Inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s 1505 *Battle of Anghiari*, a work destroyed long ago but preserved in various copies and engravings, Schnorr’s painting focuses on the epic’s decisive battle between the three most valiant of the Christian knights and their three equally fierce Saracen opponents. On the island before the coast of Africa, Roland, Brandimart, and Olivier (the emperor’s paladins) are depicted as they face off against Sobrin, Gadrass, and Agramant (their king and leader) to decide in a deadly duel the military conflict between Saracens and Charlemagne’s forces.

Contorted bodies and rearing horses engage the viewer in a scene of supreme violence and unrestrained hatred, which can only end in the death of one or the other party. Schnorr, however, was not merely interested in the canto’s dramatic possibilities. He wanted to show the scene’s deeper, universal meaning, a meaning that to him had lost nothing of its validity even three hundred years later. To that end, the artist tamed the scene’s physical immediacy by expanding the composition into a triptych and anchoring it on a low-level stone parapet. Creating an internal frame, the striking trompe l’oeil architecture evokes not only the format of religious altarpieces but also of a theater play, and this allusion to a coulisse dramatically changes the painting’s narrative logic. Witness report yields to consciously staged performance as the new construction distances the viewer twice, once optically, once metaphorically. At the same time,
the side panels, carefully separated in space and time from the ferocious battle at the center, provide an important gloss; they identify the depicted contest not only as a clash of two incompatible religions, but also as a universal battle between Evil and Good, where the side of ungodliness stands in for all opponents of Christianity, from medieval Islam to modern atheism.

Schnorr’s method of annotating the actual narrative and breaking through the epic’s fictionality epitomizes core strategies of the genre’s desired reform. The conventionalized sign of female allegory, and with it the use of traditional personifications, is sacrificed in favor of a more complex construction of the symbolic subtext. To that end, additional—if truncated—pieces of narrative supplement the epic’s central storyline so as to take on the explanatory function formerly fulfilled by allegorical addenda but without succumbing to their purely abstract quality.

The protagonists of the side panels, belated outsiders like us, exemplify this strategy. Each embodies one of the principles at stake in the depicted combat. The Saracen chieftain on the left stands for immoral heathenism, the elderly Bishop on the right for virtuous Christianity. Yet as the figures’ placement makes clear, these principles exceed the crusaders’ arena. Positioned in a liminal space between background and picture plane, the moor and the church dignitary are as close to us as they are to epic’s heroes. As such, as markers in a clearly defined yet strangely dislocated place, they annotate the picture’s
central event as much as they address us, thereby wresting the viewer from the safety of an uninvolved perspective. They are a stern reminder that we, too, must make a choice, that we, too, stand at the crossroad of Good and Evil. Bringing us back into the fold of the picture’s crusading spirit, they embody a paradox essential to the pictorial logic of much Nazarene painting. The act of distancing, engendered so carefully by the stage-like formatting, blends with a prompting of empathetic absorption so that we are at once fully outside and completely inside the pictorial world we behold. In this sense, the desired form of reception obeys the same ideal of objectified subjectivity at work in the artists’ conception of image and image-making.13

Allegorical signification expands into sociopolitical characteristics. While the chieftain is a solitary figure of supreme egotism—an incarnation of a debauched life, soulless hedonism, and despotic desires—the bishop appears as a humble servant, a man who has dedicated his life to a higher institution and its flock. Gone are whip, scepter, and slave, replaced by the model of a church and a religious procession: thus, the symbols of suppression yield to the architectural reminder of Christ’s mystical body and the congregation of the pious that constitutes it. The opposite of godless tyranny is Christian community.

The two artworks assigned to chieftain and bishop illustrate the implied dichotomy between monstrous idolatry and righteous devotion. The statue on the left is but a grotesquerie, a perverted hybrid and gilded testimony to pomposity, untamed superstition, and a lack of ideal beauty and harmonious humanity; in contrast, the relief half hidden by the bishop’s bulk is a gently sculpted scene, modest in material and coloring and altruistic in spirit. Showing Saint Elisabeth of Thuringia feeding the poor, the relief posits charity as Christianity’s guiding force. The call to serve the community and the promise of salvation implied in it intersect in the meaning of the monstrance, that shimmering heart of the background’s procession. In the wafer it displays—in that nondescript yet precious morsel of bread that turns, if we believe common dogma, into the Savior’s body in the moment of consecration—the death of the Muslim finds an equivalent in the universal defeat of the sensuous body, doomed to perish, by the transcendent glorified body of Christ. Worldly splendor bows to the promise of eternal life. The triptych’s wings and center thus advance a dialogue about two victories, one military and unique (a victory over an outside enemy), the other moral and recurrent (a victory of the pious soul over mankind’s sinful nature). Perhaps the second one is the even greater, the canvas suggests, because it is the outcome of a daily struggle, the triumph of cardinal virtue over deadly sin, of caritas over superbia.14
 Originally, Schnorr had imagined a different configuration for the Christian side (Fig. 2). A drawing housed today in the Kunsthalle Bremen shows a young man with bare head, loose tunic, and exposed legs. His lips slightly parted, his face filled with devotion, he presses the wood of a simple cross against his heart, a gesture as gentle as it is passionate. His contrapposto stance mirrors that of the African king, and this parallel enforces his function as the Muslim’s positive counterimage. Of course, such mirroring had great metaphorical potential; Schnorr nonetheless decided against it. In formal terms, this move avoided the rigidity of such strict symmetry and offered another advantage as well. The multi-figured genre scene realized on canvas bestows a gravitas on the right panel that weights the entire composition, both literally and figuratively, toward the spiritually more substantial side.¹⁵ Yet Schnorr’s motivation probably reached even further. A strict parallel of heathen king and Christian youth would have suggested reading the two—despite their male gender—as conventional personifications. This, however, would have worked against Schnorr’s intention to open up the image to multiple levels of reading and abstraction. His final design achieved this goal.

Schnorr’s composition reflects a desire for what I have called in a different context “controlled openness.”¹⁶ A quintessential feature of Nazarene art, it responded to the artists’ perceptive, if tortured awareness that pictorial signification always has a surplus of meaning independent of the maker’s intentions and outside of his control. As a reaction, they pursued a form of allegory capable of engaging with the indefinite openness of the symbolic mode, while attempting to direct the potentially limitless proliferation of meanings.
towards a specific, albeit inaccessible center: God.17 In *The Battle of Six on the Island Lipadusa*, the young Schnorr intimated this core idea of Nazarene symbolism, and the contemporary critique quickly picked up on it. An annotated *Verzeichnis des am Augusttage den 3. August 1817 in der sächsischen Akademie der Künste öffentlich ausgestellten Kunstwerke* (Catalog of those artworks exhibited on August 3, 1817, at the Saxon Academy of Art) registered with sensitivity the interpretative openness of individual figures and its significance for the picture’s overarching effect. “The female figure [of the white slave] like the other forms,” we are instructed, “can be taken as a generalization or a mere individual, but she will always denote accursedly oppressed humanity.”18 Such multivalence did not imply, however, that immediate legibility was no longer a concern, and Schnorr’s attention to clarity of meaning reveals a lingering aspiration to fit the new pictorial type into a generally accepted academic framework.19 In his own way, the budding Romantic artist still heeded the aesthetic program articulated much earlier by Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Heinrich Meyer in their journal *Die Propyläen*. In 1799, the two had announced that one could approach a scene taken from a classic epic (in this case, Homer’s *Iliad*) in a threefold manner, “as historical account, as symbolic representation, or strictly in reference to the purely human,” as long as “it always expresses itself perfectly (in and by itself).”20 Schnorr realized this idea with ingenious bravura and a Romantic twist. Each of his protagonists lends itself to certain symbolic-allegorical associations (e.g., with particular virtues, sins, or states of being) without losing narrative agency or historical concreteness. This twofold approach to the figures prevents their reduction to a single, clearly defined characteristic or allegorical abstraction.

In 1816, the young Schnorr von Carolsfeld was not yet acquainted with the Brotherhood of St. Luke; and yet, his *Battle of Six on the Island of Lipadusa* prefigured core principles of Nazarene art. For one, it embodies a paradigm of self-reflection, of art thinking about art, as it plays out a complex argument about the relationship between literature, historical imagination, and the reader-viewer.21 On the other hand, it visualizes a multifaceted discourse about the nature of time and temporal experience as manifest in and through art. We might recall here the twofold function of the theatrical setting, its calling attention to the legendary character of the source material, while addressing the ability of painting to visualize a poetic text in a moment of instantaneous perception. The battle’s relocation onto an imaginary stage is vital here, for it inserts that reflective barrier that forces us to reconsider our own position vis-à-vis the image. As a result, simulation and the fiction of immediate witnessing
are refracted, in a manner quintessentially Nazarene, by a decisive element of (self)reflection. While the past becomes, in the act of looking, immediate presence, the architectural frame reminds us of the paradox that such presencing can only occur within a space—the space of representation—that is always already of the past. After all, as Herbert Marcuse observed, “what is experienced through the medium of sensibility is present, while art cannot show the present without showing it as past. What has become form in the work of art has happened: it is recalled, re-presented. The mimesis translates reality into memory.”22 Schnorr’s allegorical framework accentuates this paradox temporality by shifting the weight from the experiential character of pure narrative to a allegorized theoretization of image-making itself. As such, the pictorial stage given to Ariosto’s epic becomes a means of visualizing the mechanisms of its own making.

Eventually, Schnorr’s annotation system superseded the rules of academic history painting, even if his renunciation of traditional personification allegory simultaneously prevented the kind of transformation of narrative into purely abstract thought-figures anathema to modern notions of history painting. Nonetheless, the allegorical reworking of key actors and the symbolic glossing of earthly events destroy the narrative quality and historicity of the illustrated literary work, and with it the fiction of immediate presence. To sum up, the triptych form of the 1816 canvas embodies a method of distancing that erodes the pregnant moment and ruptures its power to secure the linearity of unfolding time. Movement and meaning are set in permanent dialogue as action freezes into a system of allegorical allusions, a strategy further enhanced by the picture’s fantastical style and decorative surface patterns. In the end, the personifying and historical elements are suspended in an allegorical arabesque. Simple personification yields to allegorized narrative and allegorizing narration. With this, Schnorr had arrived at a system of “history painting as symbolic representation” that could now serve as the foundation for the much more daring and ambitious task of compressing the entire sweeping Renaissance poem into a limited pictorial framework.

**Allegorized Narrative and Allegorizing Narration**

In January 1828, only a few months after the completion of the wall decorations, Schnorr published a lengthy commentary about his part of the Casino Massimo. It stated that the artist’s primary goal had been to work out the epic’s “main idea,” which was to be hidden in the sumptuous design “like the thread in a lush garland of flowers.”23
The thread hidden in the garland of the apartment’s various pictorial fields was the triumph of Christianity. Folded into the story of the heathens’ campaign against Charlemagne and their subsequent defeat are the tales of Roland, the epic’s eponym, and the Moorish prince Roger, both of which Schnorr would focus on. In so doing, he extricated from Ariosto’s intricate, labyrinthine meanderings two key themes, heroism and love. This strategy responded to the astute analysis that Wilhelm Heinse had advanced in the foreword to his 1782 translation of the epic. Heinse was central to the German reception of Orlando furioso, and, it seems, to Schnorr’s reading as well. With a metaphoric splendor, the sensuality of which befitted the Renaissance poet, Heinse mapped the narrative plot onto the human body: “The African assault on France, and Charlemagne’s defense form the body; Roger and Bradamante, and Roland and Angelica, the double heart; and the adventures of the other knights and women and maiden are the blood vessels and sinews.” Schnorr’s cycle translates this anatomy into three-dimensional space by placing the deployment of the Saracen and Frankish troops at the center (reserving the main and least divided wall, the one opposite the garden, for the battle for Paris) and then framing it with the private stories of Roland and Roger. Much could be said about Schnorr’s congenial rendition of Ariosto’s exuberant fantasy; but for the purposes of this essay, it suffices to
point out the metaphorical use of the architectural setting. In the Roman apartment, the transition from action to allegorized recasting is couched in terms of a spatial movement upward, which guides us from the room’s lower sections and the actual walls to the vaulting system.

Take, for example, the lunette and adjacent vaulting cells above the north wall with its depiction of, to the right of the entrance, the baptism of Roger and, to the left, a vision of the dynasty founded by the union of the converted prince with one of the Christians’ heroines (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Divided into four distinct fields of various sizes, the four-partite composition is dominated by the monumental equestrian figures of Marfisa, Queen of Persia, and Bradamante, Charlemagne’s governess of Provence. The pagan princess and the Christian noblewoman represent two ideal yet opposing types of warrior woman. Marfisa, whose name means “fixated on Mars,” is the terrifying guerriera, a ferocious amazon suspended in a virginal, even hermaphroditic state. Bradamante, in contrast, represents Venus armata, a hybrid androgynous character who, commingling the contrasting attributes of Diana and Venus, finally resolves her ambiguous state when she fulfills her destiny as Roger’s wife and founding mother of the House Este.26 Schnorr expresses the difference in character and fate by creating a circular movement, which carries Marfisa away from us—her stallion rearing as she gallops into the background with a last proud look at us over her shoulder—toward the contemplative Bradamante as she stands, her horse beside her, at the river, which carries us to the baptism of her beloved. Bringing the rider’s forceful motion to
rest, Schnorr strips her of the combatant’s fierce demeanor. The helmet removed, Bradamante begins a metamorphosis: her features take on a soft expression and her stance relaxes into a gentle contrapposto as the iconic warrior maiden becomes an image of loving femininity. The allegorical rewriting of the two heroines, prepared by their isolation from the event’s military plot, finds completion in the appearance of a putto, who, at the very top, climbs into the setting from outside. This charming “Amorine,” as Schnorr called his adaptation from Raphael’s *Amor and Psyche* cycle in the Farnesina, symbolizes “benevolent and blissful Love.” The putto’s presence finalizes the makeover of Marfisa and Bradamante from strictly individual characters into beings who are personifications as well. From now on, the women’s narrative is inflected by their status as allegories of sisterly and wedded love.

The process of symbolization reaches its peak in the entirely allegorical conception of the three enchanters responsible for the trials and tribulations of Roger: Atlas, Melissa, and Alcina (Fig. 5). These appear before us devoid of any narrative context and—due to a monumentality that hardly leaves space for further landscape description—of local specificity as well. The elements vital to their narrative function are condensed into attributes. A hippocriff identifies the old man with the grimoire as Roger’s educator, Atlas, while the regal Melissa, her right hand raised high toward the heavens, wraps her left arm around a magical staff; finally, the tree on the right (still missing in the preparatory drawing) identifies the beautiful Circe as the man-eating Alcina, whose habit of disposing of her lovers by changing them into plants has filled her island with a thick forest of spellbound men. Under Schnorr’s brush, the three enchanters have become pure allegories signifying—from left to right—sorrow (Atlas), divine prophecy (Melissa), and temptation (Alcina). Narration is once again allegorized. As in the poem itself, the symbolic transformation of certain characters articulates a self-referential meta-commentary, which presents a carefully placed counterweight to the literalness of historical narrative proper (as displayed in the lower sections). Friedrich Schlegel’s vision has become reality. Across the walls of the Casino Massimo, historical painting ascends from action to symbolic representation.

**Intellectual Ascension**

In his 1828 commentary, Schnorr emphasized the effort to achieve a “uniform impression” of all parts by maintaining an “even tone” throughout; yet, as we have seen, he nonetheless utilized the spatial separation of wall and vaulting system, as well as a set of contrasting framing devices, to differentiate the
essential quality and metaphorical nature of the various sections. In the lower compartments, simple dark frames emphasize physical presence and corporeal immediateness. In contrast, the ceiling opens up like a tent, each field resembling a tightly stretched and brilliantly decorated tarp, an opulent protective cover held together by sumptuous red ribbons and poles of lush leafy garlands. The illusion is most pleasing, a burst of festive atmosphere and colorful celebration of the fiction’s imaginative power and the symbolical ascension we experience in its pictorialization.

No figure embodies the described shift from linear narrative to suspended allegory more forcefully than St. Michael, who appears in the central lunette of the west wall as the harbinger of the Saracens’ impending defeat (Fig. 6). The lunette with the archangel exemplifies Schnorr’s persistent search for a fine balance between historical and allegorical readings. At first, the painter had conceptualized him in the company of Discord and Silence, but later removed these personifications. Admittedly, the cost was a major departure from Ariosto’s text, but Schnorr felt that an easy identification of the archangel was more
important and could be best achieved “by painting him just like one is used to see [him].” In this context, the erasure of Ariosto’s additional allegorical personage fulfilled several purposes. For one, it removed the last vestiges of pictorialized abstractions from the cycle. It furthermore removed any distraction from St. Michael’s crucial double role as poetic character and symbolic fulcrum, and this dual identity makes him the nodal point of the transition from the walls’ literalness to the metaphysical quality of the ceiling. The ultimate function of the archangel, however, goes even deeper, beyond what Schnorr himself tells the readers of his commentary. As an angel, St. Michael represents allegorical language itself. Here, Schnorr’s medievalism came to bear on his rethinking of historical representation and informed his use of medieval motifs (such as angels) as conventional signs with symbolic power.

Schnorr had worked out this position in his long-term engagement with Bible illustration. Although a stout Lutheran, Schnorr decided that to do justice to the Scriptures, one had to abandon the more literalist approach to biblical interpretation typical for nineteenth-century Protestantism. Indeed, he insisted on the necessity to use motifs such as angels even when and where they were not mentioned in the holy text, for they embodied symbolic forms of representation that mirrored the symbolic idiom of biblical language itself. I suggest that the St. Michael of the Massimo fresco fulfills exactly this function. As an indicator of both divine intervention and the
representation's allegorical nature, the archangel presents a key to the narrative and aesthetics of the entire cycle. He not only, literally, embodies the progression from historical time to symbolic interpretation; he also reveals the religious dimension of the spiritual ascent embedded in the gaze’s physical sweep from walls to vaulting. He alerts us that we, by looking up, take in a divine economy of salvation, an economy that, at least for the Nazarenes, governs all human deeds.

The basic organizational scheme of an intellectual ascension repeats itself in the adjacent Tasso room, where Overbeck, by then the chief coordinator of the project, was charged with rendering yet another intricate epic, Gerusalemme liberata. In a manner familiar by now from Schnorr’s Ariosto, the account opens at eye level with the epic’s key battles, supplemented by further scenes from the crusaders’ struggle for Jerusalem. The heroic and stern atmosphere of these initial moments yields to a more lyrical sentiment in the upper zone dedicated to the poem’s four heroines, Armida, Clorinda, Sofronia, and Erminia (Fig. 7). Admittedly, the stories of these women are no less devoted to the themes of sacrifice, death, and the violent overcoming of resistance than the battles below. Nonetheless, their episodes strike a more poetic tone. Once again, this crucial change in the images’ atmosphere signals the transition (and ascension) from the historical to the symbolic. In case of the Tasso frescoes, this shift is further accentuated, indeed embodied, by the installment of a personification allegory as the cycle’s keystone. The image of Gerusalemme liberata appears at and as the cycle’s center, which “the main episodes of the poem, treated in an ornamental style, surround” as Overbeck added, “like a setting.”

In the end, and in marked contrast to Schnorr, Overbeck could not resist rupturing the literalness of the lower level as well, and this rupture occurs through an entry of poet, patron, and painter into the epic’s pictorial realm (Fig. 8). Dressed in burgundy with a green toga-like cloak, a laurel wreath wrapped around his balding head, Tasso rises in nonchalant monumentality before the scenery of Jerusalem’s siege and the moment when Peter of Amiens appoints Gottfried of Bouillon as the leader of the Christian armies. Casually leaning upon a white marble plinth, the Renaissance poet points us toward the event, which is, after all, his own story. Yet his focus is not on us but on the young scribe who listens attentively at his feet. His rapt attention makes Tasso also oblivious to the arrival of another group equally incongruous to the crusaders’ time as he is and half hidden behind his back: Overbeck and his patron, Carlo Massimo.
Fig. 7. Johann Friedrich Overbeck, vault with the Allegory of Gerusalemme Liberata at its center surrounded (beginning clockwise with the bottom image) Erminia and the Shepherds, Armida’s Realm, Tancred and Clorinda, Olindo and Sofronia, 1819–21, fresco. Rome, Casino Massimo, Tasso room.
The anachronistic inscription of various authors into the narrative embodies a self-referential reflection on word-image relationships, which reaches its climax and completion in the young scribe. His notation of the poet’s words visualizes the complex transmission of deed to witness report, spoken word to script, and, finally, text to image that has birthed forth the pictorial spectacle we behold. Despite his modest position, Overbeck posits himself proudly as the scribe’s modern heir, as the one who has continued where Tasso’s aide had left off: his fresco perpetuates the act of translation begun centuries before, this time from written to pictorial sign. In this sense, the painter’s self-portrait signals more than a classic assertion of authorship and clamoring for posthumous fame. It reminds us that the flow of translation and transformation never ends, not even here, in the finished fresco. The wall decoration presents itself as merely yet another moment in an endless cycle of transmission. Mute as an art, it calls upon us to relive and retell the epic as represented before our
eyes, turning visual data into conversation or, as in my case, into print. As the story receives renewed presence in the act of painting, it enters back into the flow of oral communication. Overbeck’s cameo appearance sums up the mechanism his fresco details. As the artist transfixes us with a stern gaze, his self-portrait alerts us to the fact that making history is a process, representation is an operation, and the viewer is a constitutive factor of both.

**A Christian Epic of Painting**

Dante, Tasso, and Ariosto were congenial mentors for the Nazarenes’ reform of modern history painting. After all, their poems already enacted the kind of fusion of history and symbolism—of straightforward storytelling and allegorese, absorbing adventure and Christian spirituality—that was essential to the rethinking of pictorial narrative around 1800. However, the affinities between Renaissance and Romanticism went even further, and it was no mere coincidence that epic poetry would serve the Nazarenes as a vehicle for refining the narrative technique of their new, allegorized historia. Indeed, their allegorical understanding of pictorial sign production had a genuinely poetological component. Peter Cornelius asserted this close relationship between linguistic style and visual language when he called his own major fresco cycle for St. Ludwig in Munich, dedicated to the credo and completed between 1836 and 1840, “a Christian epic of painting.”

The Nazarene association of epic and history painting tapped into a rich body of poetological theory, which, rooted in the lively and inspired discussions around 1800 about genre and its theory, had quickly produced a generally accepted distinction between drama und epic as two different temporal modalities. In this sense, Goethe and Schiller had already in 1797 postulated time as the principal, unique characteristic of the two genres, with the epic rendering the event as “wholly past,” the drama as “wholly present.” Hence, the drama became synonymous with the fiction of unadulterated presentness (*Gegenwärtigkeit*), whose essential purpose is action; the epic, in contrast, was associated with impartiality, a “calm representation of the successive,” and the “identification and selection of the purely objective.” These poetological genre theories found a striking echo in the era’s art criticism. Writing about the centerpiece of the St. Ludwig cycle, an ambitious paragone with Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, the Munich art critic and Cornelius biographer Ernst Förster observed that “the basis of the presentation of Cornelius was not, as it was in Michel Angelo, the *experience*, but the *thought*—nicht das *Ereignis*, sondern der *Gedanke*. Where Michelangelo created a drama, Cornelius produced a *Denk-Bild*, an image produced by and for thought. As Förster inferred, such art is not dramatic, but symbolic.
The “Christian epic of painting” configured history painting as a form of historical symbolism, and it was at this juncture that poetological and figural thinking merged. This observation brings us back to the last part of my argument, the assimilation of biblical hermeneutics, more precisely of typology, as aesthetic category. The program of St. Ludwig, and especially its Last Judgment, united two strategies fundamental to Nazarene history painting and unanimously geared toward breaking open linear time: the frescoes’ typological structure adopted a central trope of Christian time, while its appropriation of epic narrativity absorbed a mythical, ultimately non-Christian heritage into a genuinely theological context. The result was an inextricable interaction between poetry, history, and religion. In general, this interaction could work in both directions, from religion to historical poetry (as in St. Ludwig) or from poeticized history to theology (as in the Massimo frescoes), a fact that explains the emphatic continuities in Nazarene representations of religious and secular histories.

Paintings like Schnorr’s Battle of Six on the Island Lipadusa are powerful reminders that the Nazarenes recorded world history only through the lens of salvational history. This practice arose from the firm belief that God’s revelation in history would open up the possibility to discover His plan for the salvation of the world in and through biblical exegesis. From this perspective, even apparently secular scenes appeared to be revelations of God’s working in history. To the Nazarenes, profane history painting was thus never truly a secular story. This insight cautions us to modify the oft repeated claim that the Nazarene project rested on two pillars, religion and nation. Certainly, the construction of national identity was an important component for these religious revivalists. However, contrary to many of their nineteenth-century countrymen, they regarded neither the nation nor, for that matter, history itself as absolute; rather, they continued to subordinate both to faith. This unwavering commitment to the primacy of belief fueled a quest for a way of manifesting the Christian element in art beyond matters of content (although subject matter remained, of course, central to communicating their message). The solution was a redefinition of style as encoding in itself a Christian essence. To this end, typological thinking turned out to be essential. Under the Nazarenes’ pencil, figuralism ceased to be merely an iconographic category; style itself acquired a figural dimension. As such, it became a vital means to break down the temporal logic of historical representation, to suspend historical action in what the Nazarenes believed were supra-historical structures of form, and, finally, to uncouple the stasis of purely dual pairings and strictly binary oppositions (such as secular and religious, heathen and
Christian, medieval and modern) in a system of foreshadowing and fulfillment. In Nazarene art, style itself assumed symbolic power and was pursued as a potent expression of faith and religiousness.

**Symbols of Time**

In the Casino Massimo, Johann Friedrich Overbeck took up the task of picturing the multivalent presence of typology and doing so in explicit didactic-discursive terms (Fig. 9). With the personification of *Gerusalemme liberata* as the keystone of his Tasso room, he set an allegorical marker that pictured in one single image the three distinct aspects of typology at work in Nazarene art: first, as a principle of biblical hermeneutics; second, as a mode of historical interpretation; and, third, as an artistic norm and means of aesthetic expression.

Overbeck's personification of Jerusalem not only sums up the deliverance promised by Tasso's title. It also allegorizes the progression from Old to New Testament as the ultimate key to the poem and, beyond its narrow confines, to all salvation. Accordingly, the center image set out to visualize the implied qualitative distinction between Jerusalem's two states in the city's allegory. To that end, it presented the Hebrew Bible, signified by an unfurled scroll that touches the ground, as its natural foundation. In the preparatory cartoon, the scroll still featured the first lines of Isaiah 1:1, "VISIO ISAIAE. filii Amos, quam uidit super Iudam & Ierusalem[m]—The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amos I, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." In the final fresco, the quotation has vanished. Clearly, Overbeck trusted the metaphoric power of the spatial arrangement as a sufficient expression for the assumed superiority of the Christian Scripture over its Jewish other, and rightfully so. More substantial in weight and placed closer to heaven, the Christian book literally supersedes the original Scripture, and this placement alone suffices to evoke the proposed succession from concealed to revealed truth. The governing allegory seals the cycle's supercessionist logic.

The typological argument of the Jerusalem personification now establishes an intimate if not immediately obvious link between the otherwise conceptually and stylistically so different rooms of Ariosto and Tasso: It binds together Overbeck's abstract allegory and Schnorr's loquacious *Triumph of Charlemagne* through a missionary call for conversion. Conversion was a core theme of Nazarene art. In the Ariosto room, it runs through the entire cycle “like the thread in a lush garland of flowers,” an elemental part of the story’s “main idea,” which Schnorr had, as we might recall, located in the triumph of Christianity.

Joyous in tone and tonality, the story's final episode presents itself as a festive utopia of peace (Fig. 10). But its cheerful note is deceptive. This is not a peace
Fig. 9. Johann Friedrich Overbeck, *Allegory of Gerusalemme Liberata*, 1819, centerpiece of the ceiling fresco. Rome, Casino Massimo, Tasso room
grounded in tolerance but in the victory over difference. Its underlying theme is conversion embodied most prominently in the figure of Roger, the Moorish prince, whose baptism we see performed on the north wall, followed in the ceiling panel by the people of Bulgaria. As they offer Roger the crown of their kingdom, the Bulgarians accept the new faith along with the new leader. On the left, conversion finds yet another instantiation in the figure of Sobrin, one of Roland’s ferocious adversaries in the battle on Lipadusa. Wounded badly but subsequently nursed to health by the same hermit who would baptize Roger, the Saracen warrior, too, accepts the Christian faith. Now an integral part of Charlemagne’s entourage, he remains identifiable merely through his turban, the last remaining signifier of his former otherness.

What the rendition of conversion in the Ariosto frescoes lacks, however, is an explicit typological reference, and this is where the cornerstone of the Tasso room comes into play. At this point, we must return to my main thesis. Despite its intense iconographic encryption, the significance of Overbeck’s allegory goes beyond its iconographical content. Instead, the image’s inherent discursive nature is essential to the fresco’s narrative logic. It provides the cycle’s closing argument, summing up theological reading and mode of expression at once. As world history transforms into salvational history, allegory becomes the last word, and symbolism the events’ final meaning.

Designed as the key to the cycle’s interpretation, allegory is employed to translate the reading process from an initial, straightforward act of narrating (the retelling of the story and its interpretation) to a meta-level of discursivity (meditation on the epic’s higher meaning and theological underpinnings). As a particularly condensed image, it signals—as much as it embodies—the end of historical time, for it performs, in its abstraction, a potent rupture of chronology.
and linearity. The movement of bodies in space is replaced with the embodiment of pure meaning. Allegory becomes a mode of fulfillment. It enacts, at least in Overbeck’s eyes, the sublation of human history in eternal time.

Bringing the cycle to a close, the personification of *Gerusalemme liberata* is the nodal point where the play of temporalities is relayed from the theological into the visual. It unites the pictures’ historicism with the flow of divine time conjured up in the iconography. Typology turns into a stylistic category. History, as Overbeck’s scheme proclaims, applies not only to narration, and allegory is not only a form of signification. Both are idiomatic as well, stylistic categories that shape and redefine the reading of the object’s visual properties. Beyond its iconographical proposition, the image’s figuralism is an aesthetic determinant. It structures the work’s historicist relationship to the past it emulates.

This observation brings me to my final remarks. In the end, which in Overbeck’s design is also the high point, allegory marries typology, as world history is once again read through the matrix of salvational history. With this configuration, Nazarene art gave a modern answer to a medieval riddle. Consider here Eric Auerbach’s erudite discussion of “Figura.” At the end of his treatment, Auerbach had to confess uncertainty to what extent aesthetic ideas in the Middle Ages were determined by figural conceptions, “to what extent the work of art was viewed as the *figura* of a still attainable fulfillment in reality.” I cannot answer this question for the medieval period. But with respect to the Nazarenes, there can be no doubt that the notion of the artwork as the *figura* of future fulfillment was a central trope, which fused theological and aesthetic concepts in response to the modern conditions of artistic production. And in this fusion, history painting became symbolic representation.

**Notes**

2. See, for example, Duro 2005 or Kepetzis 2009, to mention just two recent studies.
5. For a discussion of the complex, often contradictory or mutually exclusive definitions of symbol and allegory in German Romantic thought around 1800 see Grewe 2015, ch. 7: Hieroglyph, pp. 130–47 as well as Grewe 2016, pp. 228–29. For a revisionist account of German Romanticism vis-à-vis modes of representation, symbolic structures and the production of meaning see Scholl 2007.
6. The most seminal study about the Casino Massimo is still Gerstenberg and Rave 1934; also see the entries on “Die Fresken im Casino Massimo” in Gallwitz 1981, pp. 283–353.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
19. I am following here Enderlein’s insightful analysis; ibid.
24. Heine 1782.
25. Ibid., 1, p. 83.
26. For Venus armata, see Wind (1958) 1968, p. 75; for Ariosto’s warrior women, see Bellamy 1985.
33. Overbeck to Ludwig Vogel, Rome, Holy Thursday 1818, quoted in Howitt 1886, 1, p. 413.
34. Ibid.; see for a detailed analysis of Overbeck’s fresco Thimann 2014, pp. 177–85.
36. First developed in exchange with Schiller, Goethe published his ideas about epic and dramatic poetry only in 1827; see Goethe 1958 ed., p. 249.
39. For a detailed discussion of the vital concept of “Denk-Bild,” see the introduction to Grewe 2015.
40. For a detailed discussion of the concept of “historical symbolism,” a term first coined by Cornelius himself, see ibid., ch. 6, pp. 111–27
41. See ibid.
42. See also Thimann 2014, p. 182
43. Ibid., p. 183.
44. The drawing is reproduced in Gerstenberg and Rave 1934, p. 83, fig. 65.
47. Auerbach (1938) 1959.
48. Ibid., p. 62.
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